



An Evaluation of the Russia – U.S. Young Leadership Fellows for Public Service Program

Executive Report

July 2003

PURPOSE OF THE EVALUATION

In October 2001, the U.S. Department of State's Office of Policy and Evaluation in the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) selected Aguirre International to conduct an evaluation of the Russia-U.S. Young Leadership Fellows for Public Service Program (YLF program). The focus of the evaluation was to document the outcomes of the program, to assess its impact, and to link these outcomes and impacts to the legislative mandates under which the program operates.

The YLF program is a year-long academic exchange program for university graduates from Russia and the U.S. who intend to pursue careers in public service. The program is funded through the FREEDOM ("Freedom for Russian and Emerging Eurasian Democracies and Markets") Support Act of 1992, which supports activities that contribute to economic and democratic reform and development in the countries of the former Soviet Union.

Since the program's inception in 1999, 136 students from Russia and 49 students from the United States have participated. They have attended universities, participated in internships, been involved in community service activities, learned about life and culture in the United States and Russia respectively, made enduring friendships, and incorporated these new experiences and perspectives into their lives back home.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT

"I was surprised by the many shared aspects of Russian and American culture - culture in the broadest sense of the word."

The words of this Russian alumnus speak volumes about the value of first-hand experience in the United States in promoting mutual understanding and appreciation.

But the goals of the YLF program go beyond appreciating America (or Russia) – the program is explicitly funded with the intent of developing young leaders who will remain active in public service to their country. The program does this by furnishing the opportunity to acquire new knowledge, skills, and experiences to extraordinary individuals who then return to their home countries and focus their efforts on improving their community or country.

Almost without exception, alumni are satisfied with the program, and most feel that it met their expectations. They learned both positive and negative things about life in the United States or Russia and acquired a more balanced and tempered view of the cultures and societies, of the economies, and of how their governments work. When asked about the applicability of what they learned on the program, the Russians found the academic experience to be most applicable,

while the Americans found it to be considerably less applicable (62% vs. 21%). The internship and community service experience were more applicable than the academic experience for the Americans (each at 40%), but still somewhat less applicable than for the Russians (57% and 48%, respectively). Both groups found the program useful for professional development, the Russians more so than the Americans (95% and 82%, respectively). Consistent with this, both groups report that they are better off than their peers, *and attribute this directly to their participation in the program.*

Aguirre International therefore concludes that the YLF program is meeting its goals in supporting both market reform and democratic institutions and attitudes among the Russian participants, and recommends that the Russian side continue to be funded as one of the exchange programs between the United States and Russia. Although the American participants were satisfied with the program and certainly gained something from participating in it, the results of the evaluation suggest that that side of the program was not meeting all of its legislative and programmatic goals. Some changes would need to be made to the American participants' program to make it more useful and applicable. The findings, however, support the decision reached while the evaluation was in process to eliminate American participants from the program.

PROGRAM GOALS

The YLF program shares the same overarching legislative goals as other NIS programs funded by ECA, which are to

- contribute to economic and democratic reform and development in the independent states of the former Soviet Union, as specified in the FREEDOM Support Act (FSA) legislation; and
- contribute to the broader mission of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs in promoting mutual understanding through exchange activity, as mandated by the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange (Fulbright-Hays) Act of 1961.

The more specific goals of the program are listed below, with the longer-term goals first.

- YLF students will acquire an understanding of important elements of a civil society, with a special emphasis on public service and volunteerism.
- YLF students will develop leadership skills that will help them attain their educational, professional and civic goals.
- YLF students will develop an appreciation for American/Russian culture.
- YLF students will interact with Americans/Russians and generate enduring ties.
- YLF students will demonstrate a sense of responsibility to their communities and their countries after they return home.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

To be selected for the YLF program, students from Russia and the United States must have completed their undergraduate degree and intend to continue with their education. They enter merit-based competition that assesses applicants' leadership potential, community service experience and plans, academic excellence, and proficiency in English/Russian. Selected participants complete a year of graduate-level study in United States/Russian universities. They

also complete a community service requirement and take part in internships. Through the 2002 academic year, this was a two-way exchange. Starting in 2003, this program will continue to bring Russians to the United States, but funding to support Americans traveling to Russia is no longer part of the program plan.

The YLF program has three main components: academics, community service and an internship. The academic training Russian students obtain is focused in three general areas: community affairs, government affairs, and corporate affairs. Each year, a limited number of students have been allowed to pursue computer science as a field of study, and in the first year two students were allowed to select linguistics, but that option was dropped the second year. The American students generally focus on Russian studies but have selected many specialties within that area.

The students enroll for a standard course load and must complete a minimum of 10 hours of community service per week. The students are responsible for identifying their community service organization(s) and taking the necessary steps to undertake their volunteer service. The community service is intended to correspond with the students' field of study. At the end of the academic year, students must also complete an internship. Again, students are responsible for finding an appropriate internship that supports their academic studies. The YLF program and all alumni activities are administered by the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX).

It is important to highlight that the Russian and American participants faced such different conditions that the two sides of the program could, in many ways, be viewed as two separate fellowship programs. While the two groups are therefore compared at many points in the evaluation, the comparison is designed to shed light on differing elements of how the program works in each country and does not assume that the expected outcomes of the Americans and the Russians are, or should be, the same.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The evaluation was conducted between July and December 2002 and employed three principal data collection strategies:

- a face-to-face (interview) survey of YLF alumni;
- discussion groups of Russian alumni and semi-finalists; and
- open-ended interviews with program officers and other key informants.

The survey instruments were designed by Aguirre International and vetted by ECA and the implementing partners. Aguirre International subcontracted with the Institute for Comparative Social Research (CESSI) to conduct the in-country interviews and focus groups in Russia. Interviews and focus groups were conducted in Russian for the Russian participants and in English for the American participants. Because the program is so small, Aguirre International chose to do a census and attempted to have all alumni participate in the survey. In total, the survey teams completed interviews with *88 Russian alumni (65% response rate) and 38 American alumni (78% response rate)*.

After the completion of the survey, the Aguirre evaluation team conducted two discussion groups with alumni in Moscow and St. Petersburg. The discussion groups were specifically timed to shed light on unexpected and unusual findings that emerged during the analysis stage. Finally,

the evaluators met with program officials and participants in a variety of venues during the fieldwork period.

PROGRAM FINDINGS

The YLF program has clearly been a positive experience for nearly all of the alumni; 99 percent of Russians and 100 percent of Americans would recommend the program. Overall, 98 percent of Russians and 94 percent of Americans are satisfied or very satisfied with their experience, and 85 percent of Russian alumni and 82 percent of American alumni say that the program met most or all of their goals. Alumni explicitly state that the program has had an impact on their plans and expectations. Seventy-nine percent of the American alumni and 68 percent of the Russian alumni believe that they are better off than their peers in terms of their education and their work, and attribute that better status to this program.

Table 1 - Status Comparison to Peers		
Status	Russians (%)	Americans (%)
Better	67.8	78.9
Same	31.0	21.1
Worse	1.1	0.0

Note: some alumni were unsure as to their status vis-à-vis their peers.

More importantly, the YLF program is clearly meeting its goals with the Russian alumni and is meeting some of its goals with the American alumni.

<p><i>Goal 1: YLF students will acquire an understanding of important elements of a civil society, with a special emphasis on public service and volunteerism.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The YLF alumni seem to understand the important elements of civil society. About 80% of Russians and 72% of Americans interviewed have continued their participation in public service since the program. • Those who have continued their community service, however, appear to be very active, with 80% of Russians and 70% of Americans reporting themselves as more active than before the program. • Some 84% of Russians and 82% of Americans support equal rights for all citizens regardless of ethnicity or circumstance. • In terms of values, the program may not be performing as well as it could, in that 74% of Russians think it is justifiable to claim benefits to which one is not entitled, 44% think it is justifiable to not pay on public transportation, and 24% think it is justifiable to avoid taxes (compared to 34%, 16% and 8% of Americans, respectively).
<p><i>Goal 2: YLF students will develop leadership skills that will help them attain their educational, professional and civic goals.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on self-assessments, the survey shows that YLF alumni overwhelmingly believe the program improves their leadership abilities (91% of Russians and 81% of Americans) and helps them acquire new skills for professional development (95% of Russians and 82% of Americans).
<p><i>Goal 3: YLF students will develop an appreciation for American/Russian culture.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Almost all alumni (100% of Russians and 97% of Americans) agreed that they better understand the host country's culture as a result of the YLF Program.

<p><i>Goal 4: YLF students will interact with Americans/Russians and generate enduring ties.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The YLF Program successfully engenders lasting ties between the alumni and host country natives and institutions. Over 90% of Russians and 95% of Americans had monthly or more frequent email contact with friends in the other country. Website usage and contact with expatriates were significant for both Russian and American alumni. Some alumni even report continuing their internship and public service work long distance.
<p><i>Goal 5: YLF students will demonstrate a sense of responsibility to their communities and their countries after they return home.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many of the alumni moved from their home communities to another after the program (42% of Russians and 45% of Americans), but most remained in their home country. Only a few Russians left, going to Georgia, Cyprus, India and the U.S. Some of the Russian alumni who had relocated were maintaining contact with their home communities and several were sponsoring community-building projects while away, based on focus group responses. Several of the Americans remained in Russia as well, while others pursued opportunities in Bulgaria and the UK.

A PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

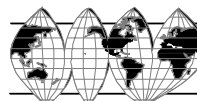
As the YLF program plans for the future, the program has the opportunity to reinforce the experience through alumni activities and ensure that the long-term goals of the program are truly met. Alumni are clearly most interested in pursuing their new-found professional identities through alumni activities – they just need the opportunity. For example, both Russian and American alumni are far more interested in professional development opportunities, workshops, trainings and seminars, and small grants than they are in social events.

The goal of the program is to give individuals exhibiting significant leadership potential the opportunity to acquire new knowledge and skills, and in turn, to return home and make a difference in public service. The first step is clearly taking place: alumni have acquired new knowledge and skills as a result of the program experience. And many are beginning to have an impact in their communities. Russian alumni demonstrate leadership skills, a greatly improved understanding of the United States, and enduring ties with U.S. institutions and American citizens. It is the program's challenge in encouraging alumni to remain in public service after their completion of the program, particularly given the salary differentials between the private sector and the non-profit and public sectors in Russia.

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By:
Aguirre International
1156 15th Street NW, Suite 1000
Washington, DC 20005

For a complete copy of the report, please contact the Office of Policy and Evaluation at (202) 619-5307 or by email (evaluations@pd.state.gov).



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